

**TESTIMONY OF JON SOLTZ**  
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**SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS**  
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Congressman Lamborn, and members of the committee for inviting me here today to discuss this critically important issue.

I am Jon Soltz, and I am the Co-Founder and Chairman of VoteVets.org, which is a leading organization of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans. VoteVets.org was established to give voice to the 21st century patriots who have fought in these wars, and to raise concerns about the state of today's military preparedness as well as the resources and support available to service men and women when they return home.

I myself am an Iraq war veteran. From May to September 2003, I served as a Captain during Operation Iraqi Freedom, deploying logistics convoys with the 1st Armored Division. During 2005, I was mobilized for 365 days at Fort Dix New Jersey, training soldiers for combat in Afghanistan and Iraq. I also served with distinction in the Kosovo Campaign as a Tank Platoon Leader between June and December 2000. Let me make clear, however, that today I am speaking for my organization and the troops and veterans we represent, not for the U.S. Army.

I've also experienced, first-hand, many of the issues we'll be talking about today. After I returned from Iraq, I knew that I was mentally affected from the war. Eight months later, I went to the VA and asked for help. The nurse, who I'm close with to this day, told me I came to the

right place. After a few tests, though, I was told that I just had something called “Adjustment Disorder,” and that I should come back in for counseling once a month, for four months. Maybe that was the right diagnosis, and maybe it wasn’t. All I know is that I didn’t feel that the diagnosis was based on any in-depth testing, and I’m not sure that my treatment was enough.

Even worse, just a short time later, it was announced that the VA center I had been going to, in Pennsylvania, would be closed. I tried to attend the press conference to announce the closure, so I could learn more about what was going on, and was told that I could either leave on my own, or police would be called to escort me out. I hadn’t even said a peep, or protested at the event. I simply wasn’t allowed to watch.

That’s when I held my own first press conference, across the street, where I questioned to the media, why I was good enough to go and fight and risk my life for this country, but not good enough to deserve an explanation as to why my VA hospital was closing. That is when I made the decision that I would talk about these issues, until I was blue in the face, so that not only would veterans get answers, but we could see real fixes to the issues we face.

The recent report in the Washington Post regarding Walter Reed’s Building 18 set off a media and political firestorm here on Capitol Hill. Many in the media dramatically shook their heads in sorrow on television. Many Members of Congress started to call press conferences to express their dismay. Even the President expressed surprise and anger.

I have to admit, as someone who has dealt with our veterans’ care system, and talks on a daily basis to many others who have, I found it somewhat amusing that everyone seemed so surprised that the quality of care didn’t meet the quality of service these troops and veterans gave. Those of us who have served have known for a long time about bureaucratic and capacity

problems, especially at the VA. I want to make clear that I do not impugn the fine service those who work at the VA centers have given. They are all great people, and do heroic work. But, it is an overburdened and woefully underfunded system that has all too often tied their hands, and hurt America's veterans.

Nonetheless, veterans care in this nation has not been up to snuff for a long time. Many veterans' organizations much older than VoteVets.org have been trying to get the media and politicians to pay attention for a long time. No one wanted to listen. In the end, what I find so sadly funny is that a few rats did in one day what we veterans haven't been able to do for years – get America's attention.

It's important that we as a nation look at the larger issue here, though, and not get too bogged down in just the problems at Building 18. That larger issue goes way past the Pentagon's hospitals, like Walter Reed, into the VA system.

Are our current military obligations affecting the capacity of the VA to deal with an influx of vets? Absolutely. Last year, VoteVets.org did a poll of about 450 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, focusing both on the issues they faced in the field, and issues they faced at home. Here is some of what we found:

Troops returned home, and many encountered emotional and physical health problems as well as economic hardship resulting from their service.

□ One in four veterans has experienced nightmares since returning, including 33 percent of Army and Marines veterans and 36 percent of combat veterans.

□ A fifth of all veterans (21 percent) and a quarter of Army and Marines (26 percent) and ground combat veterans (27 percent) say they have felt more stress now than before they left for war.

□ Among National Guard or Reserve veterans, 32 percent said their families experienced economic hardship; 25 percent feel more stress now than before the war; 32 percent experienced more extreme highs and lows; and 30 percent experienced nightmares.

□ Twenty six percent of all veterans have sought some service from the VA or a VA Hospital, including 33 percent of Reservists and National Guard respondents.

These numbers were compiled just last fall, so we believe those numbers have held, if not gotten worse, as the violence and chaos our troops have to deal with gets more intense. Nearly 1.5 million troops have now been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. So, to put our poll in real numbers, about 390,000 troops and veterans have or will seek care from the VA, if no more troops are deployed to the wars. Frankly, I think the numbers will be higher, for two reasons. First, the nature of this war lends itself to more mental trauma, because you are in a 360 degree battlefield, where you truly feel hunted. This stress becomes worse as you are extended multiple times, which many troops have been. Secondly, we are using our National Guard and Reserve at a much greater level than we have ever, in any war. Those Guardsmen and Reservists are still not guaranteed health care, and many of them will not be working when they return home, so they'll have no insurance at all. Thus, the only option available to them will be VA services, meaning we'll surely see a huge spike in the levels of demand from Guardsmen and Reservists.

If you talked to any veteran of Vietnam or the Gulf War, they'll tell you there were serious capacity issues with the VA before Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the start of the wars, the Bush administration has failed to adequately increase resources for the VA to meet the need. That's why Secretary Nicholson had to come back to Congress a while back and admit the agency was billions short. Though Congress acted fast to appropriate emergency funds for the VA, the agency doesn't get close to what it needs. According to the nation's top veterans groups, which put together The Independent Budget each year, the agency is still being shortchanged by about ten billion dollars in the latest budget proposal.

If the President has his way, the agency's budget will be cut in 2009 and 2010. God willing, we will have started to redeploy from Iraq by then. That will be precisely the time when hundreds of thousands of new veterans will flood the VA system. Will there be capacity problems? You can't possibly imagine.

What does this mean in real terms? It means more frequent tales that I've heard since beginning VoteVets.org. I know one veteran, Josh Lansdale of Missouri. Josh served as an EMT in Iraq and came back with post-traumatic stress disorder and a busted ankle. He faced a six month wait to get the care he needed.

Another young patriot, Tomas Young, is now wheelchair bound, paralyzed from the chest down, because he was shot in the spine while riding in a truck without the right armor. Every day, he takes a cocktail of pills just to get through the day. He's lucky enough to have a wife that brings him to his VA center on a regular basis, but Tomas tells me that the quality of care is never as consistent. Sometimes he has a good experience, and sometimes the VA just doesn't have the ability to deal with him. In short, Tomas can't depend on the system.

I know of veterans who have to hold their prosthetics together with duct tape, because their VA center doesn't have anything that fits right. Veterans in rural areas I know of have to travel for hours to get the care they need. Veterans like Tyson Johnson from Alabama, who lost a kidney and had shrapnel in his lungs from a mortar attack, often couldn't stand the long drive to the VA hospital, followed by the long wait for care, so he didn't go at all, a lot of the time.

Again, the people employed by the VA are not the problem. The problem is two-fold: Budgetary and systemic. But, the problem right now is a walk in the park compared to what the situation will be like in a year or two, if nothing substantial is done.

I'm hopeful that Congress and the Bush administration will finally address these issues. I hope this committee works with your colleagues on the Committee on Armed Services, to examine the serious transition problems there when a troop leaves the Pentagon system and enters the VA system.

Those of us who served have kept our end of the bargain. We've risked our bodies and lives in service. Now it is time for you to do your jobs, and keep the government's end of the deal by ensuring that the Department of Veterans Affairs is fully funded, and that bureaucratic SNAFUs are eliminated. No more excuses. No more delays. We veterans deserve nothing less.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify here today. I sincerely hope that this marks a new day in how we address the issues facing veterans care in this nation. And though much of what I said today I've said before, for the first time, I feel that the American people are listening. Most importantly, I hope you will commit to keeping this process moving, and not end your concern with today's hearing. It will be important that all of us – those of us on this panel, those

of you in Congress, and the administration all work together to really make a difference and give America's veterans the level of care they deserve.